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# Brimfield Historical Commission

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## *A Message From the BHC*

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Our dear friend and colleague, John Obed Curtis, passed away on April 3. He was a longtime member of the Historical Commission, a professional historian and curator and a source of knowledge on so many topics. This issue of the BHC newsletter is dedicated to John, a tribute to a man who will be sadly missed by everyone who knew him personally and by all those who knew of his many accomplishments. Rest in Peace John.

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## *Members*

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*Sue DeBruin, Chairperson*  
*Adrienne Bachand*  
*Roseann Bergdoll*  
*Mark Conners*  
*Robert Corry*  
*JOHN CURTIS*  
*Michael DeFalco*

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## *Donating Historical Documents*

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If you have any historical documents or photographs pertaining to Brimfield history or her residents that you don't want or don't know what to do with, please consider donating them to the Brimfield Historical Commission. A large part of our mission is to promote and preserve Brimfield history and one important way to manage that is by insuring that items contributing to and documenting that history are kept and made available to future generations. If you share our love of town history and are considering making a donation, please contact a Commission member to discuss the process and answer any questions you might have. If you do have historical items but don't wish to part with them, consider allowing the Historical Commission to make digital copies and then return the originals.

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## JOHN OBED CURTIS

### *Eulogy*

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The Brimfield Historical Commission wants to honor the life and legacy of John Obed Curtis, a dear friend and cherished member of our Historical Commission. John wasn't just a member. John was a cornerstone, a passionate advocate for preserving the stories of our community. For over 30 years, John dedicated his time and talents to this commission. He brought an abundance of knowledge to every project, whether it was meticulously researching a bygone era, painstakingly restoring a historical artifact, or sharing local lore. John possessed a remarkable ability to bridge the gap between the past and present, making history come alive for all who encountered him.

John's dedication wasn't confined to the commission meetings. He was a tireless champion for historical preservation throughout our community. In 1960, John was hired as Curator of architecture by the Old Sturbridge Village Museum in Sturbridge, MA, and in 1968, he was promoted to Director of the Curatorial Department. He played an instrumental role in moving many of the buildings to OSV from other locations, including Thompson Bank, the carding mill, and the Asa Knight General Store. John left the village in the mid to late eighties and worked part-time as Curator of History at The Springfield Museums throughout the nineties. He tirelessly advocated for the protection of

landmarks. John's passion was contagious, inspiring others to appreciate the rich tapestry of our shared past.

John was instrumental in refurbishing the Civil War monument. He oversaw the sandblasting of the monument and the repair of the cannons.

John played a key role in the redesign of the Cumberland Farms store. John made countless design recommendations to ensure the new Cumberland Farms store respected the town's historical aesthetic, all of which were accepted by Cumbies and incorporated into their final design.

John was also involved in the design of the Vietnam/Korean War monument and helped author some of the wording of the monument.

John wasn't just about dates and facts. He understood that history is about the stories of the people who came before us. He had a profound respect for the struggles and triumphs of those who shaped our community. John's work ensured that their voices wouldn't be forgotten.

For those of us on the Brimfield Historical Commission, John's greatest contribution was sharing his vast knowledge with us.

Today we mourn the loss of a remarkable individual. But let us also celebrate the life John lived, a life dedicated to preserving our heritage. He leaves behind a legacy of knowledge, appreciation, and a deep respect for the past.

John's spirit will continue to live on in the restored buildings, the documented archives, and the hearts and minds of all who were touched by his passion. May we forever honor John's memory by safeguarding our history and sharing its stories with generations to come. Rest in peace, John. You will be deeply missed by all in the Town of Brimfield.

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*Civil War Monument  
Rededication Address*

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*Address given by John Curtis on Sunday, September 24, 2006 at the Re-Dedication of the Soldier's Monument.*

The War to preserve the Federal Union, our Civil War, started on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861 with the bombardment and capture by Confederate militia of Fort Sumter, a coastal defense fort located in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. The Confederacy was comprised of eleven southern states who had seceded from the Federal Union over the issue of individual states' rights with the underlying causes being the morality and legality of slavery. The most

significant battle was fought on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1863 at the Pennsylvania farming village of Gettysburg, resulting in 17,500 Union casualties, among whom was Rufus Parker of Brimfield, a Private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Massachusetts, who died from wounds sustained on the third day. There were 22,500 Confederate casualties. Gettysburg is recognized as the turning point in the war. After nearly two more years of fighting, the principal hostilities ended on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1865 at the McLean Home in the small Virginia village of Appomattox Court House with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, Confederate States of America, to General Ulysses S. Grant, commander in chief of the United States forces. The surrender confirmed the reunification of the nation, and it confirmed the freedom of some four million former slaves who had made possible the predominantly agricultural economy of the southern states. At the time of the Civil War the population of our country, including both North and South, was thirty-one million. About 140,000 Union soldiers died in the battle and about 75,000 Confederates died in battle. Overall losses were far greater due to death from wounds, illness, and imprisonment. The Civil War claimed an estimated one million casualties.

Total financial costs for both sides probably exceeded fifteen billion dollars at a time when privates in the U.S. Army earned only thirteen dollars a month with a raise to sixteen towards the end of the war. Many men considered this to be “good money”. In addition to the loss of life, the war destroyed numerous southern homes, towns and cities. Southern railroads were shattered and all industry and trade essentially stopped. The economy of the South collapsed. Although damage to the infrastructure of the North was minimal, the effects of four years of war were permanent for those men who returned home maimed or terminally ill, and for the many, many families who had lost fathers, sons, or loved ones.

In 1860 the population of Brimfield was 1,363. One hundred and fourteen men from Brimfield served in the Civil War, most of them for two or three years. Of this number eighteen men lost their lives. This represents a casualty rate of 16%. It is impossible to imagine public acceptance of such losses today. The names of all those Brimfield citizens who served are inscribed on the memorial tablets in the Town Hall. The names of those eighteen Brimfield men who lost their lives, in battle, through sickness, or from incarceration at Millen prison camp or the notorious Andersonville, Georgia are inscribed on this monument.

The enormity of the Civil War demanded some form of lasting recognition and remembrance of all those who had served and sacrificed. Brimfield was among the first of countless communities, both North and South, to erect a memorial to their fallen defenders. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 1866 the town meeting voted to expend an amount not to exceed twelve hundred and fifty dollars to raise a suitable memorial. The Brimfield monument was designed by the Honorable William N. Flynt of Monson who provided the bluish granite from his own quarry. Unlike so many of the familiar commercially produced

memorial statues, our monument is unique because it was designed locally and was fabricated from native stone. The four government surplus cannon were acquired some seventeen years later, in 1882.

The monument was dedicated by the town on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1866. Samuel W. Brown was Chief Marshall. It was a major community event, with local dignitaries, veterans, Brimfield citizens, and representatives from adjoining towns present. At 10:30 AM a procession formed in front of the Brimfield Hotel and marched to the Church. The Brimfield Hotel stood where the parking lot for the Academy is now. The Southbridge Cornet Band provided music for the occasion. The Rev. Charles M. Hyde, remembered today as the author of the centennial *History of Brimfield*, offered the Invocation, and Newton S. Hubbard, a former selectman and a prominent community leader, read the Declaration of Independence. Patriotic music complemented the commentaries.

The procession returned to the monument which is surrounded by a handsome cast iron fence donated by Silas C. Herring, proprietor of the Brimfield Hotel at the time. The Dedication Prayer was offered by the Rev. Joseph Vaill, who had been a much loved minister of the Brimfield Church for twenty-two years and was at the time serving a congregation in Palmer. Dedicatory remarks were delivered by Captain Francis D. Lincoln of the 46<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment. The Brimfield Rifle Company, a militia unit founded in 1828, was represented by forty veterans. Veterans of the recent war were present. Following a program of music and the Benediction, the celebrants marched to a communal Dinner. Edward W. Sherman, of the Brimfield Hotel, had agreed to furnish some three hundred to five hundred meals and, since there was no building in town of sufficient size to serve that many people, we believe that the eleven tables were set up on the Common. Again, Reverend Hyde offered an Invocation and, following dinner, gave an address of Welcome. Regrettably, the menu is not known, but we do know from surviving notes that, following dinner, toastmaster James B. Brown presided over the proposal of some twenty-six toasts.

The toast offered by Mr. S. K. Foster of Monson sums up the feelings of many of those present at the dedication of the monument honoring the Brimfield men who fell in defense of our country. "Our lamented, slaughtered soldiers, whose memory we cherish and honor today: let us not fail to recount to our children's children, by monument, by song, and by story, the noble deeds, by which our 2<sup>nd</sup> Independence was established, and perpetual Freedom given to four millions bondsmen".

A Toast by Mr. Emory Sanford of Oxford, Mass. struck a somewhat different chord:

"Our beloved country God bless her, While we regret and deplore the immence [sic] sacrifice of lives and treasure expended in putting down the most gigantic and unholy rebellion which ever existed in any country, we have reason to rejoice in the hope that the reconstruction of the rebellious states will tend

to cement a lasting reunion of hearts which shall endure and bless many generations yet unborn.”

Today, some one hundred and forty years later, as we celebrate the refurbishment of the Soldiers’ Monument with this program of rededication, these sentiments are as appropriate and heartfelt now as they were then.

Thank You

John O. Curtis

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*Civil War Monument  
Restoration Work*

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John O Curtis (left) talking with Bruce Lane of Mr. Pleasant Memorials.



*An article in the Villager from June 6-12, 1974*

STURBRIDGE. The early 19<sup>th</sup> century grandfather clock in John Curtis' office reads 11:00. Its hands never move, and never will. To the casual observer, it is an old, broken useless antique. To John Curtis, it is a timepiece, more valuable than the finest Omega.

"I have a wristwatch to tell the time of day," says Curtis, director of curatorial services at Old Sturbridge Village. The clock, he says was built between 1815-1825 in New Hampshire.

"No, it doesn't tell time ... it tells me about time ... Look closely ... at the marks of wear on the side," he says, indicating a spot where the wood has been scraped white. "I look at that and wonder how the marks got there. ... Maybe its owner accidentally scraped a chair against it ... the color, the signs of wear, these are the manifestations of the passage of time."

Trying to describe what draws John Curtis, or anyone, to artifacts of the past, is not easy for him.

"I don't talk well about philosophy," he says candidly. He uses phrases like "turned on," "identify" and "pleasure" to explain his passion for "country" antiques.

As director of the department, Curtis has a supervisory staff of six people working under him, including a curator of mechanics (tools), of textiles, of furniture, and of musical instruments.

Curtis' primary area of expertise is architecture. He specializes in the restoration of old buildings. The Asa Knight General Store, a 1972 Village acquisition, is one of his biggest accomplishments as director and architect.

Curtis explains that the curatorial function embraces the collection, stewardship, care, storage, repair, and display of every object on exhibit at OSV. In addition, he says, there are the collections of objects not seen by visitors, but used exclusively for study and research.

The old costumes in care of the Village, are scarcely ever seen by tourists, Curtis says. They are used to aid the curatorial staff in reconstructing authentic costumes more suitable for practical wear by the interpretation personnel.

A better example is the water wheel; part of the grist mill operation. "The antique water wheel we have has inherent design deficiencies, which in addition to its age, make it useless for practical day-to-day use ... the 19<sup>th</sup> Century water wheel was simply not equipped to function 363 days a year, as it is required to do here in the village."

The need for authenticity and the need to demonstrate historical principles to visitors sometimes place the village on the "horns of the dilemma" according to Curtis. "We have an obligation to make objects as close to letter perfect authentically as we can with our limited knowledge of the past," he says. "But unless the objects work, we can't meet the equally important obligation of educating the public."

Curtis, a 1958 graduate of Colby College in Maine, spent several years with the Society for Preservation of New England Antiquities, before coming to OSV in September, 1960. He has no formal training in architecture. His colleagues claim Curtis has “perfect pitch” for artifacts. The same kind of gift that a musician has for the pitch of a note, or the novelist for the right sentence. They say that Curtis, can walk into a room, stone cold, look at a piece of furniture, and give you its history; where it was made, whether it is original, its style, whether it was restored, or married from two other pieces.

Curtis is aware that most people who visit the village do not bring with them a feeling for historical artifacts. “We get people here who look at them on several different levels,” he says. “Some marvel at the manner people once lived in, and others say it’s too bad they lived among all this old stuff.” “Our job,” he continues, “is to encourage appreciation of artifacts.” He says an experiment in using commercially produced spinning wheels was deemed a failure. “The kids in the museum ed building, we felt, should have the experience, even if it’s not conscious, of working on an exquisitely-wrought tool.

“We’re a catalyst for cultivating interest that people already have,” he says. He gets four or five letters a day from visitors, asking for information on restoring old homes they have inherited, or letting him know of their warm response to the exhibits.

“Everyone responds to objects differently,” he says, leaning over in his seat to demonstrate the meaning of scratches on a clock, that still reads 11:00.

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### *The Elm Tree House*

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Home of Tabitha Moffat Brown (19<sup>th</sup> century) and John Obed Curtis